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(1) Taxi driver slaying: Laxity of U.S. forces control over servicemen; No visible measures to find deserters

NIKKEI (Page 19) (Abridged)
Eve., April 2, 2008

In the case of the taxi driver slain in the city of Yokosuka in Kanagawa Prefecture, the Yokosuka Police Investigative Headquarters of the Prefectural Police Department carried out questioning this morning of a male U.S. sailor (22) of Nigerian origin stationed at the U.S. Yokosuka Naval Base. Only this February, there was an arrest of a U.S. Marine in Okinawa Prefecture for the rape of a middle school girl. With voices strongly calling for measures to stop a recurrence, the fact that a sailor who fled from his base is now under strong suspicion of having been involved in the murder case, raises severe doubts about the way the U.S. military controls its personnel.

The city of Yokosuka, where the base is located, has urged the base to create a system so that deserters can be quickly found, but concrete measures have never been revealed.

According to the U.S. Navy and other sources, the sailor on March 8 disappeared from the Yokosuka base, and even after the Aegis ship, Cowpens, on which he was a crewmember, left port, his whereabouts continued to be unknown.

On March 19, while the U.S. Navy was searching for the deserter, the cab driver, Masaaki Takahashi (61) was slain in Yokosuka City. Three days later, on March 22, the U.S. sailor was taken into custody by the U.S. Navy in Tokyo's Gotanda area, far from the base in Yokosuka. The opportunity to take him into custody reportedly was a

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message from the sailor himself.

Information about the Navy deserter was never transmitted to the local government or the local community. The speeding up of the U.S. Navy's response was because suspicion had arisen that the sailor was involved in a murder. When his credit card was found inside the cab, the U.S. military then informed Yokosuka City that same day that there was suspicion of his involvement in the crime. Reportedly, even the information about his having been taken into custody was not immediately brought to the attention of the city government.

However, the U.S. sailor's movements remain unknown for the approximately two weeks after he disappeared from the base. According to the investigation of the U.S. Navy, he went in and out of the home of female acquaintance living in Tokyo. They only had fragments of information, such as that he had taken a kitchen knife from her home.

The city of Yokosuka on March 22 asked the U.S. Navy side to take such steps as 1) create a system so that a deserter can be swiftly discovered; and 2) establish communication lines with the Japanese side (in such cases). The U.S. military has replied, "We are already working on a response that will include a review of the system," but specific measure have yet to be revealed.

(2) Chief Cabinet Secretary Machimura hints at flexible response by U.S. over transfer of U.S. sailor

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 11) (Full)
Eve., April 2, 2008

At a news conference this morning, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura was asked about the transfer of a U.S. sailor who is suspected of slaying a taxi driver in Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture, once the police confirm that he is a suspect. He answered that he thought the U.S. side would flexibly respond, stating: "I think that the U.S. side, based on the state of the investigation, will handle it properly in accordance with the Japan-U.S. agreement (that the U.S. side will give favorable consideration in the case of heinous crimes)."

(3) U.S. sailor admits in prefectural police questioning that he killed taxi driver

SANKEI ONLINE (Full)
13:28, April 2, 2008

It was learned earlier today that a 22-year-old U.S. sailor based at Yokosuka Naval Base, who has been detained by the U.S. Navy on charge of desertion, has admitted to investigators of the Yokosuka Investigative Headquarters of the Prefectural Police Department that he had killed Masaaki Takahashi, 61, a taxi driver of Shinagawa Ward, Tokyo. The sailor's credit card was found in Takahashi's taxi in Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture.

Investigators were sent this morning to Yokosuka Naval Base and questioned the seaman about his whereabouts before and after the incident, his motive, and other factors. As soon as the charges are set, Kanagawa police will seek an arrest warrant for the sailor and ask the U.S. side to hand him over.

The sailor initially denied his involvement in the incident, telling

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U.S. Navy investigators that he had been "at a bar near the crime scene" around the time the killing took place and that he had "lost his card." His statements changed time and again. He recently began making statements totally admitting his involvement in the incident.

It has also become clear that a female acquaintance of the U.S. sailor in Tokyo had explained to the U.S. Navy that the kitchen knife (with a 20 cm blade) used in the crime "resembles the kitchen knife that disappeared from my home." It has also come to light that a man bearing a close resemblance to the sailor was caught by a security camera near JR Shinagawa Station, where Takahashi is believed to have picked up his last passenger. Further, it has been found out that the U.S. seaman had implied his involvement in the case in his telephone call to a male friend. The taskforce has launched the interviewing, believing that there is a strong possibility that the sailor was involved in the incident.

Takahashi was found slain at around 9:30 p.m. March 19 with a knife stuck in his neck in the driver's seat in seatbelts in his taxi parked on a street in Shioiri-cho, Yokosuka. The seaman left the base without permission on March 8 and the U.S. Navy took him into custody as a deserter on March 22 in Gotanda, Tokyo.

(4) Parliamentary leagues launched in succession

SANKEI (Page 5) (Full)
April 2, 2008

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ or Minshuto) President Ichiro Ozawa is in high spirits because he succeeded in having the provisional gasoline tax rate nullified, all part of his aim to force an early dissolution of the Diet. Against that backdrop, there has been a burst of activities by nonpartisan parliamentary groups, each of which having an eye on the political situation in the future.

Hidenao Nakagawa, a former secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party, launched yesterday the Parliamentary League to Achieve Goals of the Kyoto Protocol. A total of 60 lawmakers from the LDP and its coalition partner New Komeito joined the league. Of the 60 members, 30 attended (yesterday's inaugural meeting). Nakagawa was made the chairman; former Environment Minister Yuriko Koike, the secretary general; New Komeito deputy head Toshiko Hamayotsu, the deputy chairman; and former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, became the honorary advisor.

Soon after Koike and Nakagawa visited China on March 23-24, the parliamentary league was inaugurated on April 1, coinciding with the start of the commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. A mid-level LDP member said: "Their aim is probably to pave the way for fielding Koike as a rival candidate against Taro Aso, a former LDP secretary

general, in the next LDP presidential election."

Koike stated in the meeting:

"Japan reduced gasoline prices on the day when the Kyoto Protocol's commitment period began. This means, if we do nothing, Japan will dispatch an utterly incoherent message to the world. Since there are so many people in this room, the room seems to growing warmer."

Koizumi did not show up, but Nakagawa said: "I will ask him to attend the next session by all means."

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The league will now recruit members. In order to prevent any speculation related to political maneuvering, it will not link up with the DPJ. As part of his effort to prevent global warming, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched on March 5 the study group called "Cool Earth 50 Forum." Abe has firmed up an alliance with Taro Aso. It can be said that Aso and Koike will compete over environmental issues.

Meantime, Koichi Kato, a former LDP secretary general, held the second meeting of the suprapartisan study group called "Association of Bibinba" in the Diet building. In the session, Takeshi Umehara, honorary professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, gave a lecture on Japan's nationalism from a philosophical point of view.

Only 15 attended the first meeting on March 26, but yesterday's session was attended by 67 lawmakers, including former LDP Vice President Taku Yamasaki, former LDP policy chief Nobuteru Ishihara, DPJ Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama, former DPJ policy chief Yoshito Sengoku, and former New Komeito Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Junji Azuma.

Because many lawmakers took part in the meeting, Kato said in high spirits: "I did not expect that such a number would participate." He also stated: "Unlike the group made up of former LDP policy chief Shoichi Nakagawa and former MITI Minister Takeo Nakagawa, our study group's policy rejects narrow-minded nationalism." He strongly wants to check the Truly Conservative Policy Study Group, which is led by Nakagawa and other conservative lawmakers. His remark indicated his real intention of rallying together liberal forces.

The Parliamentary League for Early Repatriation of Japanese Citizens Kidnapped by North Korea, chaired by Takeo Hiranuma, also held a meeting yesterday in the Diet building. Under joint signature with the Liaison Committee of the Families of the Missing Abductees and Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, the league adopted yesterday a resolution calling for additional sanctions against the North, including a complete ban on travel to and imports from that country.

About 40 conservative lawmakers -- Shoichi Nakagawa from the LDP and Jin Matsubara from the DPJ -- joined the parliamentary league. Although the group discusses only abduction issues, it might become a core of allying together of conservative forces if the government takes a conciliatory stance toward North Korea.

(5) Former Prime Minister Mori: Fukuda prepared for the worst with road-related taxes

ASAHI (Page 4) (Full)
April 1, 2008

Former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, the backer of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, yesterday gave an interview to the Asahi Shimbun, in which he talked about his views on Fukuda's management of his administration, which stands at a crossroad.

-- Prime Minister Fukuda decided to allow the revenue sources specified for road projects to be used for other general purposes, starting fiscal 2009.

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Mori: I think that's a good idea. When Mr. Fukuda asked me about the matter, I told him that he should do as he wished and that as long as he continued to hesitate, he would never see daylight on this matter. I also told him that he had no choice but to make up his mind on this. He seemed to have been determined."

However, I wonder whether taxpayers will agree to integrate the entire special account from the road-related taxes into the general account budget. Taxpayers may say that the road-related taxes should be scrapped if the money is not going to be used for road projects. Some would argue that if funds are needed for measures to deal with education and environment projects, revenues from the consumption tax should be allocated. The ruling and opposition camps should consult on such.

-- You mean that the issue should be discussed as part of tax system reform, don't you?

Mori: I think it is good to debate both the integration of the special account from the road-related taxes into the general account budget and the consumption tax issue. But some may start linking talk about a consumption tax hike to dissolution of the House of Representatives. Since this is for the sake of the nation, political parties must not just pursue their own interests. This is good chance for the largest party in the Lower House and the largest force in the Upper House to assume some responsibility.

-- The backlash of public opinion against the gasoline tax being raised again will be strong.

Mori: If the gasoline tax is hiked (to its original level), those enjoying the benefits of the lower priced gasoline will react sharply. I wonder how residents in rural areas who spend more money for gasoline than those living in urban areas will react. The question is how far the prime minister will carry out his integration plan.

-- The Fukuda cabinet has continued to lack popular support.

Mori: As long as the Diet is in session, the cabinet support rate will not go up. Only such negative materials for the government as higher prices, including gasoline and wheat, have come up. If (Fukuda) starts uttering fantastic things, as Mr. Koizumi used to do, his cabinet support rate may rise, but he will have to pay for it later. He does not need to do something in order to boost his cabinet support rate. The approval rate for my cabinet declined, but I never thought of it as a big deal. At that time, the Upper House election was held in summer, I had been determined to resign as prime minister at an early time, so as not to make trouble for party members. Mr. Fukuda, however, does not need to dissolve the Lower House.

-- In a bid to regain the support rate for the cabinet, some have called for a shuffle of the cabinet after the current Diet session ends.

Mori: Even if a makeshift measure lifts the support rate, it will soon decline again. But most of the current cabinet ministers were picked by Mr. Abe, not by Mr. Fukuda. So, I wonder how much they are concerned about Mr. Fukuda, who is now in trouble. I want him to appoint those who listen to what he says.

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-- A rumor was going around from late last year to early this year that (Fukuda) would shuffle the cabinet, but he did not do so.

Mori: Since there were only few days left before the regular Diet session convened, he might have thought that a cabinet shuffle would create confusion. I suggested (to the prime minister) putting off

the convocation of the Diet, but

-- When do you think is the best timing for a shuffle?

Mori: It is hard to say, but a cabinet shuffle is necessary to change the situation. If possible, the cabinet should be shuffled, after the current Diet session ends with no extension. However, with the Group of Eight summit drawing closer, it may be difficult for Mr. Fukuda to shuffle his cabinet.

-- You mediated last year the talks (between Fukuda and Ichiro Ozawa) on a grand alliance, didn't you?

Mori: Mr. Ozawa, president of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ or Minshuto), appeared to have thought that it would be good to talk with the Liberal Democratic Party about a grand alliance at a time when the DPJ gained strength in the Upper House election. He was feeling that his grip on the party would weaken with the passing of time. But young lawmakers in the DPJ did not accept the idea. I think Mr. Ozawa no longer has anyone to talk to.

-- Have you talked recently with Mr. Ozawa?

Mori: No, I haven't. He seems willing to talk with me, though. He pretends to be out when he is inconvenient.

-- The DPJ has called for an early dissolution of the Lower House.

Mori: If the ruling coalition did not hold a two-third majority in the Lower House, the Diet would already have been dissolved. We should be careful about a Lower House dissolution. There will be no change in Diet deliberations even if the ruling camp wins the race. We will then consider a grand alliance. Mr. Fukuda has been having difficulties, but I think he has withstood hardships. Anyhow, he should now put all his energies into making the upcoming G8 summit a success.

(6) Interview with DPJ Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama on course of legislative branch

YOMIURI (Page 4) (Full)
April 2, 2008

-- Did President Ozawa of the Democratic Party of Japan initially intend to agree to promote former Bank of Japan Deputy Governor Toshiro Muto to the bank's top post?

"President Ozawa has never mentioned any specific names. He said, 'The helm of the Bank of Japan has long been monopolized by male graduates of University of Tokyo Faculty of Law. I want to drive a wedge into it.' He told me (on February 22): 'For the day we are in power, we must also give thought to psychological distance from the Finance Ministry.' When the four top party executives met days later, on the night of (February 26), Mr. Ozawa said, 'If the ruling coalition does not ram the fiscal 2008 state budget through the Diet, let me voice my thinking. In such a case, the leadership must

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cooperate and weather the situation.' I thought he would decide to endorse the appointment of Mr. Muto. The ruling bloc eventually bulldozed the state budget through the Diet. We cannot cooperate with the government, which is not trustworthy. That was what I thought."

-- Are retired vice-ministers of finance for international affairs not qualified for the job?

"Although we don't intend to oppose everything, we have rejected the government's two previous nominees, taking the position that the central bank's helm should not always be given to retired Finance Ministry officials. If the third person also comes from the Finance Ministry, it would be difficult to endorse him."

-- How are you going to handle revision talks on the taxation-related bills?

"We intend to respond to talks. All the same, if revision talks always follow clashes between the ruling and opposition camps, we would be integrated into the ruling bloc, making it difficult to tell whether we are a ruling party or an opposition party. The brakes must be applied."

-- Isn't the DPJ making moves with an eye on the next Lower House election, thinking that in the event the ruling coalition readopts the bills, the administration would come under fire?

"It is inappropriate for the government to compile the budget based on the maintenance of the provisional tax rates. If (the government) flexibly changes the budget by incorporating the thinking of the DPJ, which is dominant in the Upper House, there is no need to settle the matter with an election. We are being criticized as using the road issue for an election. Some observers say that there won't be an election because the Liberal Democratic Party seems to have decided not to have a Lower House election anytime soon. Their observation might not come true."

-- Isn't it possible for Prime Minister Fukuda and President Ozawa to hold party-head talks to break the political deadlock?

"There should be a venue where party heads can have frank talks to find a way out of the current deadlock. Then again, if a meeting is held strictly between the two, as they did last year to discuss the idea of a grand coalition, it would be criticized as backroom deal-making. The secretaries general should also be allowed to attend. It would be better still to actively conduct party-head debates at the Diet."

(7) Postwar politics with no ideology: Nakajima

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 4) (Full)
April 1, 2008

The Diet has been divided with the ruling parties dominating the House of Representatives and the opposition parties controlling the House of Councillors. As it stands, political realignment-or a regrouping of political parties-is now becoming more likely to take place after the next election for the House of Representatives. However, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto), as the two major political parties, are both upholding their "conservative"

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standpoints. Then, what is conservatism? What is the ideal way to carry out political realignment? The Tokyo Shimbun interviewed Takeshi Nakajima, an associate professor at Hokkaido University, one of the new crop of young commentators.

Takayuki Shimizu, Tokyo Shimbun reporter

Shimizu: About a year ago, DPJ Deputy President Naoto Kan said, "We're more like the conservative mainstream (than the LDP)." To say nothing of DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa, it was a surprise that Mr. Kan, who is a civic reformist, used the word "conservative." Do you think he wanted to say the DPJ is a conservative party just like the LDP? How do you define conservatism?

Nakajima: To begin with, we need to know where conservatism came from. Conservative thinking goes back to the French Revolution, which was triggered by the Enlightenment. In those days, there were people who criticized the Enlightenment. This is said to be the start of modern conservatism. In those days, enlightened people thought human rationality can create an idealistic society for the future. In the meantime, people with conservative ideas thought it would be impossible to do so. Instead, they tried to find wisdom and knowledge out of a certain kind of tradition, historical sensitivity, God, and some other values that are beyond human intelligence. They tried to change their society gradually while meeting the times and the circumstances at different times.

Shimizu: Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pushed ahead with

structural reforms based on market mechanisms. Was this also conservative thinking?

Nakajima: That's quite different, I think. In the postwar era, the conservatives and the reformists in Japan were only opposed to each other. That brought about the hollowing out of ideologies. Mr. (Shinzo) Abe (former prime minister) did not have any ideological axis. Neither did Mr. Koizumi. They thought things would go well if they only left everything to the market (mechanism). They were only riding on neoliberalism.

Shimizu: In the LDP, Kochikai (Koga-Tanigaki faction) calls itself the "conservative mainstream." They're also economy-oriented while insisting on (Japan's) lightly arming itself (in the sense of butter before guns).

Nakajima: Japan's postwar politics has never shown any steadfast conservative ideology, I think. Politicians in Japan have created something like social democracy. In it, big government reallocates massive resources drawn from the taxpayers' money. However, their efforts lacked transparency because they were working for special interest groups. Meanwhile, Japan went through political reforms. In that process, some politicians thought anything that was not transparent was no good. They tried to destroy Japan's traditional way of reallocating taxpayers' money, and they tried to destroy whatever resembled social democracy. As a result, they destroyed even social democracy. Instead, new liberalism arose based on the law of the jungle. This has brought about a severe social divide, and it exhausted the rural areas.

Shimizu: There are now two major political parties. However, I don't know their difference well. Some people say the two parties can be realigned into a conservative party and a liberal party.

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Nakajima: Conservative ideology and liberal ideology are not confronting each other. Those on the side of reformists should try to reconstruct social democracy. Under the slogan of social democracy or under the slogan of conservatism, the two major political parties form a coalition with minor political parties. I think this multiparty system will continue. New Komeito will try to stop the LDP from going too far, and the Japanese Communist Party will try to pressure the DPJ so the DPJ will not turn conservative. This multiparty system is desirable. Social democracy is a political style that uses a lot of tax money for the weak. Politicians create a grand design of Japan and construct an equal, idealistic society. This can be called social designism. In the meantime, those on the conservative side think it is impossible to do so. They look closely into an important role of the government, and they will try to change this country little by little. I think conservatism and social democracy should get along with each other.

Shimizu: Do you think such a two-party system is possible?

Nakajima: Maybe not forever. When I was a high school student, the Hosokawa reforms started. I thought Japan would go in that direction. But in the end, neoliberalism was the only winner. Mr. Ozawa's opinion about Japan being an "ordinary country" was a completely neoliberal argument. His argument is that it is desirable to construct a society in which individuals should try to do something on their own responsibilities. That needs political reforms and deregulations. This was Mr. Ozawa's logic. Mr. Koizumi beautifully carried them out. The leaders of the two confronting parties said the same thing, so people didn't know what they meant. The DPJ became aware of it and is now shifting to social democracy under the slogan of "livelihood first."

Shimizu: They should sum up the past political reforms before political realignment?

Nakajima: Both the so-called conservatives and the so-called reformists must think again over what they did in the past. What were the 1990's? What went wrong? There were too many extreme arguments. I think they have to think about something that is a

little more down to earth.

(8) Japan eager to bring criminal charges against Sea Shepherd activities against Japanese whaling vessels, but difficult to collect evidence from countries concerned

SANKEI (Page 28) (Full)
April 1, 2008

The Public Safety Bureau (PSB) of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) have eagerly moved to bring criminal charges against the protest activities conducted against Japanese whaling vessels by the Sea Shepherd (SS), a U.S. anti-whaling group conducting radical activities overseas. To that end, obtaining cooperation from the countries concerned is absolutely necessary, but Japanese authorities have found it difficult to solicit their cooperation. The PSB has asked the country where SS boats are registered and other countries for cooperation and has started collecting evidence necessary to identify the activists involved in the violent acts. However, the identification process has not moved smoothly forward. Even if the activists are identified, it remains uncertain whether the suspects will actually be handed over to the Japanese authorities. Japan may

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consider bringing the case to court overseas.

Criminal acts against Japanese vessels

The attacks by Sea Shepherd in February of last year and this March are subject to the investigation by Japanese authorities. SS members obstructed the whaling operations of the Japanese whalers Nisshin Maru and Kaiko Maru by throwing bottles of fluid believed to be butyric acid, scalding several crewmembers on board, and by trying to tie a rope around the ship's propeller.

These attacks occurred on the high seas, but criminal law stipulates that the law is applicable to those who commit a crime on board a Japanese vessel overseas. Based on this provision, the PSB and the JCG have investigated the incidents, with the aim of bringing criminal charges against the activists. Through the International Criminal Police organization (ICPO), they asked Britain, where the group's boats were registered at that time, and the countries from which the members come for their cooperation in the investigation.

Efforts to identify the activists

Japanese authorities are pushing ahead with analysis to identify the perpetrators, based on the video footage taken by crewmembers. But it is impossible to do so using only the footage. In the incident on March 3, "several persons hurled bottles of butyric acid into the Japanese vessel at the same time, so it is difficult to find out whose bottle caused injuries to the crewmembers," a senior JCG officer said.

In the incident in February last year, since the person who threw a rope into the water was wearing a ski mask, Japan has had to depend on information being kept by Australia, which is the SS vessels' base of operation, and other countries. But a senior official of the National Police Agency complained: "They have not necessarily given replies to all our inquiries. That is why our investigation has not made the headway we had expected."

Handover of activists

Even if Japanese authorities complete the process of prosecuting the incidents as criminal cases, the handover of the criminals will be still another hurdle to overcome. Japan has not concluded an extradition treaty with countries other than the U.S. and South Korea.

But Japan has joined the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against Vessels at Sea (SUA), together with Australia, The Netherlands, where SS vessels are now registered, and other countries. The convention regards unlawful acts that threaten the

safety of maritime navigation as a crime. It specifies that: (1) the convention can be used as the legal grounds for the handover of criminals; and (2) a country that finds a person who violated the SUA in its territory but does not take the extradition procedures is required to have its authorities deal with the case.

The police authorities of Australia, where the SS boat in question made a port call this March, questioned the SS members on March 15. Minister for Resources and Energy Martine Ferguson commented: "The Australian government is willing to even prosecute the incident as a criminal case." This remark probably reflects his intention to handle the incident. But an expert on maritime affairs said: "Many

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Australian people are strongly against whaling, so the government might be difficult to bring criminal charges against the activists.

Interview with research head Nishiwaki: It was life threatening

Shigetoshi Nishiwaki, the head of the research department of the Institute of Cetacean Research, responded to an interview arranged by Sankei Shimbun. He participated in the research whaling operation last fiscal year as head of the team. Major exchanges follow:

-- The Nisshin Maru, which you were aboard, was attacked by Sea Shepherd.

"The ship was navigating for oil supply. It was traveling at the speed of 13 knots (about 24 kilometers per hour), but the SS vessel tried to hit our ship many times. An activist on the SS boat also attempted to tie a rope around the propeller."

-- How was the atmosphere inside the vessel?

"The ship played a warning that the crew should not come on deck. The crewmembers near the water cannons at the end of the vessel were injured by hurled bottles of butyric acid. An activist said in broken Japanese, 'nusubito (theft).'"

-- Do you think that if the SS vessel had hit your ship, your ship would have gone to the bottom?

"I feared damage to be caused by a collision more than damage from the act of materials being thrown. If we are thrown into the zero-degree water, we will die. Many crewmembers were feeling their lives were in danger. While devoting ourselves to safely running the ship and also trying to protect the activists' lives, we were enduring their radical protest activities. Although the Nisshin Maru was safe, but the Kaiko Maru was hit by the SS vessel."

-- Was there any impact of the incident?

"After returning to Japan, several crewmembers quit their jobs in response to their family members' advice. A member whom I worked together over the past ten years gave up his post. I also feel angry at the activists for deteriorating the quality of our research data."

(9) MHLW refers question of safety of cow cloned from somatic cells for human consumption to Food Safety Commission

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The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) yesterday asked the Cabinet Office's Food Safety Commission (FSC) to assess cows, pigs, and their offspring cloned from somatic cells to see whether the meat from such animals is safe for human consumption. The purpose is to obtain a final conclusion about those cloned animals, now that studies and research carried out in Japan and abroad have already found that there is no problem about such meat being safe for human consumption. If the FCS concludes that the meat is safe for human consumption, it would open up a market for cloned cows and pigs. But the MHLW notes that food products from cloned animals, including imported ones, are not being distributed at present because each

country has exercised restraint in their sales. However, the new

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move by MHLW is likely to cause controversy, given the deep-seated food-safety concern of Japanese consumers.

Regarding foods cloned from somatic cells, such as cows, pigs, and goats, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released a final report in January that stated such meat and dairy products are the same as those processed from ordinary animals. The FDA declared cloned animals to be safe for human consumption. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) also issued a similar declaration the same month.

In Japan, the MHLW's research team came up with a report on cows cloned from somatic cells in 2003. The team concluded it was inconceivable that the meat from cloned cows would be harmful to humans if consumed. The National Agriculture and Food Research Organization (NARO), an independent administrative agency under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), released a report in March that concluded cloned cows, pigs and their offspring were safe for human consumption.

Taking these circumstances into consideration, the MHLW decided to refer the question of the meat of cloned animals being safe for human consumption to the FSC, thinking that it was time to make a final decision on the safety issue. In the U.S., however, cloned animals have yet to be put on the market, even after the safety declaration was issued. In Japan, too, MAFF has asked each research institute that succeeded in producing cloned cows not to market them.

The FSC will begin discussion on cloned animals as early as tomorrow and will notify the MHLW of the results of its assessment. The assessment also will reflect opinions obtained from the public. In the past, the FSC has taken several months and even years in its discussions. There is the possibility that other countries will lift their self-restraint on the marketing of cloned animals before the FSC comes up with a final conclusion. The MHLW said that it would not impose a ban in imports, noting that Japan cannot restrict imports of cloned animals, given the released scientific knowledge that found no problem with the safety of such meat. Based on the FSC's final conclusion, MAFF plans to discuss how to respond to the issue of cloned animals.

SCHIEFFER